

VZCZCXRO1016
PP RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHCHI #0003/01 0070659
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P R 070659Z JAN 09
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0937
INFO RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHXS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1014

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000003

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

NSC FOR PHU

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PROP](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: REDSHIRTS FLEX THEIR MUSCLE IN NORTH AHEAD OF BY-ELECTIONS

REF: A. 08 CHIANG MAI 178 (PRO AND ANTI THAKSIN GROUPS)
[1](#)B. 08 CHIANG MAI 168 (POLITICAL TEMPERATURE)

CHIANG MAI 00000003 001.2 OF 002

Summary and Comment

[1](#)1. Over the past few weeks, pro-Thaksin (redshirt) protestors in northern Thailand have come out in force to show their opposition to the current Democrat Party-led coalition government, and intimidate its officials and supporters. Though not violent in nature, these protests have included blocking off a hotel, a large gathering in front of the Chiang Mai airport, vandalizing property, burning a casket in effigy, and attempting to blockade a shopping center. These actions have been carried out in advance of by-elections due to be held in two northern provinces, where the races could be close.

[1](#)2. (U) Comment: Northern Thailand continues to be the center of redshirt activity, and we can expect to see the redshirts remain vocal as long as the governing coalition stays in power. The fact that the two by-election races in the north have the potential to be close may be another factor motivating the redshirts to come out in numbers at this time. At the current level of intensity, their intimidation tactics may not be as successful as they hope. Resorting to violence, however, as the redshirts did on a few occasions last year (Ref B) could change the dynamics rather quickly, in ways difficult to predict. End Summary and Comment.

Reds, Not Yellows, on the March This Time

[1](#)3. Several incidents over the past few weeks have highlighted the opposition of pro-Thaksin redshirts to the current governing coalition. On December 20, approximately 200 redshirt supporters paid an unwelcome visit to the Chiang Mai residence of an MP, whose Motherland Party is part of the current governing coalition, to protest his vote in the lower house in favor of Abhisit's ascension to the post of Prime Minister. The MP himself was not home at the time. The protestors burned a casket in effigy in front of the residence, and handed a letter to his assistant demanding that he resign from the Motherland Party and join the Democrat Party within seven days. (Note: The Motherland Party joined the pro-Thaksin People Power Party coalition after the December 2007 elections.) The protestors threatened to return for a follow-up visit on December 27 if their demands were not met. So far, the MP in question has not resigned from the Motherland Party, nor have the redshirts marched on his residence.

[1](#)4. It did not take the redshirts long to reinvigorate themselves after the New Year's holiday. On January 3, they

blockaded all entrances to the Royal Lanna Hotel in Chiang Mai in an attempt to prevent Minister of Labor Phaithoon Kaeothong from holding meetings he had scheduled to discuss campaign strategy with the Democrat Party's candidate in a by-election scheduled for January 11 in Lamphun Province. During the blockade, vehicles were not allowed to leave or enter the property without first being checked by the protestors. The group eventually disbanded upon discovering that the Minister had left the hotel prior to the redshirts' arrival. (Note: By-elections will be held for 29 seats in 22 provinces, including two northern ones, on January 11.)

15. In a separate incident on the same day, redshirts attempted to mount a blockade around a shopping center in Lampang that has traditionally served as the provincial headquarters of the anti-Thaksin Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), as well as a PAD rallying site. Democrat Party MP Somkiat Pongpaiboon was in the complex at the time, having traveled to Lampang for PAD meetings. The redshirts were not able to seal off the area due to swift action by the police and shopping center staff to lock all doors to the complex.

16. On January 6, redshirt supporters harassed former Prime Minister and current advisor to the Democrat Party Chuan Leekpai on three separate occasions. Protestors confronted Chuan, who was assisting the campaign efforts of DP candidates in Lampang and Lamphun provinces, succeeding at hitting him in the face with an egg in Lampang, and dousing his car with pig's blood in Lamphun. Protestors also assembled in front of Chiang Mai's airport, waiting for Chuan, whom they expected would attempt to catch a flight back to Bangkok. Chuan avoided the protest by entering the airport via the military wing, and moving to the civilian side only after entering the inner security perimeter. At no time did the protests force Chuan to cancel or reschedule any of his meetings.

CHIANG MAI 00000003 002.2 OF 002

Diplomats and Media React

17. (SBU) Several journalists have pointed out the degree to which the redshirts use pro-Thaksin community radio stations to organize their protests, which redshirt contacts confirmed (Ref A). The journalists argue that the politicization of these radio stations and the fact that they broadcast slanderous rhetoric about the current government during the redshirt protests on January 6 underscores the need for Thailand to regulate community radio. (Comment: The pro-PAD radio station in Chiang Mai is also a key means of organizing PAD gatherings/protests.) Separately, the wife of a former Foreign Ministry official, who is herself an honorary consul, told us that she did not want her husband to join the current government. "I don't want the reds burning something in front of my house," she commented at a social function. We will continue to keep our eye on the red-yellow conflict, including the degree to which both sides employ community radio stations to mobilize their supporters.

MORROW